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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FINAL TRIP TO MINDANAO UNDERSCORES U.S. COMMITMENT TO PEACE AND PROSPERITY

¶11. SUMMARY. During her final trip to Mindanao on January 8, the Ambassador emphasized the long-term commitment of the U.S. to peaceful development in the region. The Ambassador launched an English proficiency program for seven universities in the region, inaugurated a neighborhood footbridge, and visited a welding class for out-of-school youth. Each event received significant media coverage. The Ambassador's trip also provided an opportunity to receive an update on military-related issues, host a lunch with the local press, and bid farewell to the people of Zamboanga and institutional partners in the region. Throughout the trip, the Ambassador reiterated that the USG will continue to support economic development, peace and security in Mindanao. END SUMMARY.

Expanding Job Opportunities through English Proficiency

¶12. The Ambassador launched a USG-funded Job Enabling English Proficiency (JEEP) program for seven newly affiliated partner colleges throughout Mindanao. The JEEP project improves the employability of graduates of Mindanao colleges and universities by expanding and enhancing the English language training capability of the participating colleges. The Ambassador shared a common vision for a stable and thriving region with the 3,000 college students in attendance. JEEP will ultimately be implemented in 20 or more colleges and universities in Mindanao.

Connecting Communities and Facilitating Commerce

¶13. The Ambassador inaugurated the Tetuan-Guiwan footbridge, which is the 27th infrastructure project constructed by USAID's Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) program in Zamboanga City. The new footbridge replaced a dilapidated and unsafe structure that hindered commerce and was hazardous to students crossing the river to attend school. The Ambassador reiterated the continuing commitment of the U.S. government to economic growth and the peace process. USAID's GEM program will design and construct up to 870 additional infrastructure projects throughout the conflict-affected areas of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago in the next three years.

Providing Youth with the Tools to Succeed

¶14. The Ambassador spoke with out-of-school youth participating in a USAID-sponsored arc-welding course. Through the Education Quality and Access for Learning and Livelihood Skills (EQuALLS) project, this program contributes to the economic well being of local communities through technical training for disenfranchised youth. The Ambassador thanked the training staff for their commitment to education and exhorted the students to use this opportunity to build successful careers.

Supporting Security and Stability in Mindanao

¶5. The Ambassador shared breakfast with members of the Joint Special Operations Task Force - Philippines (JSOTF-P) and thanked them for their service and their contribution to creating the necessary conditions for peace and prosperity in Mindanao. A joint Military Information Support Team briefing with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and JSOTF-P updated the Ambassador on ongoing cooperation and underscored the positive working relationship between the AFP and U.S. Special Forces.

Media Outreach

¶6. The Ambassador's visit received extensive print and broadcast coverage. In addition to press pull-aside interviews at each event, the Ambassador hosted a lunch for 18 members of the Zamboanga press corps. The Ambassador reflected on the many USG-sponsored projects in Mindanao over the past three years and recognized the press corps' contribution to freedom and the right of the people to be informed.

KENNEY